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Who's the 'Q' in LGBTQ? Study shines light on 'queer' identities.

By Tim Fitzsimons

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For some, "queer" is a loaded word — a negative epithet from a less accepting time that was hurled at anyone perceived to be gay. But for others, particularly younger LGBTQ people, it is a reclaimed term and a less restrictive self-identifier.

While the word's use — and its 21st century reclamation — has been mostly anecdotal up to this point, a [new report from the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law](#) has put scientific data behind the population of queer-identified people in the United States. According to its findings, nearly 6 percent of sexual minorities identify as queer, while 47 percent identify as lesbian or gay, just over 40 percent identify as bisexual and about 7 percent identify as "other."

"We find in this study that queer individuals make up a sizable proportion of sexual minorities, who are distinct in a number of important ways from other sexual minority people, both in terms of demographic characteristics and sexuality, and across gender identity," said lead author Shoshana K. Goldberg, a research consultant at the Williams Institute and an assistant professor focusing on LGBTQ health at the University of North Carolina,

Chapel Hill.

Diving deeper into the data, the most striking demographic characteristic of the self-identified queer community comes into focus: age. Ninety-eight percent of queer people are ages 18 to 44, with the vast majority (76 percent) ages 18 to 25, or [Generation Z](#). The study found that just 2 percent of queer-identified people are ages 52 to 59, the oldest age cohort in the study.

The vast majority of queer-identifying people, according to the report's findings, were assigned female at birth (83 percent), with over half identifying as cisgender women. Queer respondents were also significantly more likely than lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents to identify as "genderqueer/nonbinary."

Queer respondents also reported significantly higher education levels than lesbians and gay men and were less likely to be living in poverty than other sexual minorities. They were also more likely to report being attracted to transgender people, and transgender men in particular.

Eighty-five percent of cisgender queer women report being attracted to both men and women, and two-thirds of them say they're attracted to both cisgender and trans people. Roughly half of cisgender queer men report being attracted to both men and women, and 72 percent report attraction to both cisgender and trans men.

"Queer identity seems to represent greater openness to partners of all gender identities," said study author Ilan H. Meyer, a public policy researcher at the Williams Institute. "Some young people may perceive it as an identity that is more fluid than 'lesbian' and

'gay.'"

Robyn Ochs, a bisexual activist and campus speaker and editor of *Bi Women Quarterly*, said she is "not surprised at all" by the survey's results, since she sees the trend among young people in her work as a campus speaker.

"We come to our identities for strong personal reasons, and it's my belief that if we took the entire LGBTQ+ community and locked us in a room and told us we can't come out until we reached consensus, we would spend the rest of our lives in that room," she said.

Ochs said that coming out as bisexual still elicits negative responses, even today, for a variety of reasons, including an assumption from other non-straight people that bisexuals benefit from heterosexual privilege. Ochs said she added the word "queer" to her identity in the 1990s and recently added "pansexual," too.

"I see those three different words almost as describing: Is something blue, or is it turquoise or is it azure?" Ochs said. "I think that they are all overlapping terms; they can overlap comfortably."

While the Williams Institute report asked respondents to choose their current sexual identity label, many sexual minorities, like Ochs, use multiple, overlapping identifiers at the same time.

Journalist Trish Bendix said she identifies as "a lesbian, a dyke and a queer woman." She said "queerness feels more all-encompassing," noting that some corners of the lesbian community are not inclusive of women who are attracted to trans, nonbinary and genderqueer people.

"This is why, although many women who may technically be lesbian-aligned will choose 'queer' as their identifier — to set themselves apart from what they see as a closed community," Bendix said.

For others, "queer" is a catchall term that doesn't force someone into a restricting box.

Gillian Branstetter, a writer and transgender advocate, said self-identifying as queer "can be a very liberating way to identify precisely because it's so vague."

"It allows each person to create their definition for it free of expectations or judgment," she said.

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